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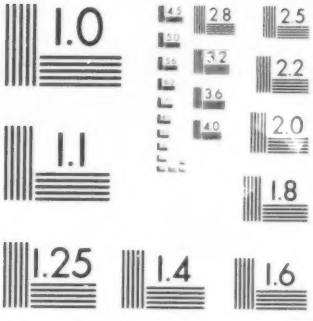

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
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(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 971 CS 504 917

AUTHOR Jensen, Marvin D.
TITLE The Decline of the Audience.
PUB DATE 16 Mar 85
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Listening Association (6th, Orlando, FL, March 14-16, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiences; *Behavior Change; *Behavior Patterns; Behavior Problems; *Behavior Theories; Drama; Films; Influences; *Social Behavior; Speech Communication; Teacher Role; Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Rudeness

ABSTRACT

The decline of manners prevalent in American audiences can be reversed only by finding and addressing the causes for poor behavior. One theory suggests that social stresses have a ripple effect, eroding generosity and spawning a meanness of spirit that is eventually reflected in audience behavior. A related theory suggests that audience rudeness increases when people have not suffered enough. Other theories suggest that the decline of audience manners is more related to technological influences than to social changes. Such things as videogames and computers encourage quick reactions and offer instant resolutions--thus creating behaviors and expectations alien to aesthetic involvement. Education remains the primary counterforce to disruptive social and technological influences. Educators must foster the "old-fashioned" concept of manners. Toward that end (1) performance should be a central requirement of secondary school and undergraduate communication education, (2) curriculum planners should make performance courses prerequisite to criticism courses, (3) teachers should emphasize appropriateness rather than correctness of audience behavior, and (4) teachers should try to raise consciousness about audience behaviors. (HOD)

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THE DECLINE OF THE AUDIENCE

Presented to the 6th Annual Convention

of the

International Listening Association

Orlando, Florida

March 16, 1985

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Glenda Jackson, describing Laurence Olivier's performance in Othello at London's National Theatre, spoke of "that moment when an audience is almost afraid to breathe," lest they interrupt the greatness of the performance.[1] At such moments, "both the artist and the spectator actively cooperate, and the value of the work is dependent on this reciprocity."[2] This interaction is actually a network of relationships, a community which also includes the lateral interaction of fellow artists and fellow audience members. As in all human networks, the community of performance is seriously weakened when this reciprocal responsibility is neglected or disdained.

The Problem

Consider the following occurrences, which unfortunately are not isolated.

A woman in Austin, Texas, is watching a play from the balcony of a theatre. A couple behind her is whispering so loudly that she must lean forward to hear the actors' lines. At this point the man who has been talking taps her shoulder and complains that she is blocking his view.

A prominent Broadway actress in a serious drama stops the play and comes to the front of the stage where she stands silently until the random, distracting noise in the audience abates.

An acclaimed concert violinist stops in mid-passage until the coughers throughout the hall gradually subside.

Audience members punctuate a singer's performance by taking flash photographs throughout the evening.

Audience members attending the film Making Love (a non-sensational portrayal of a homosexual relationship which is clearly described in advertisements) feel compelled to assert their "normalcy" by loud groans throught the film.

Some Iowans attending the motion picture Country, filmed on location in that state, drown out the screen dialogue by their vocal recognition of familiar scenes.

Audience voices compete with Mozart's music during screenings of Amadeus.

Reflecting the prevalence of these behaviors, theatres and concert halls find it necessary to print warnings against photography; and film theatres post "No Talking" signs beside their "No Smoking" warnings. This trend confirms the delicate balance between manners and "laws." Manners reflect "obedience to the unenforceable" and a decline in manners inevitably leads to an increase in rules and laws.[3] But this authoritarian response only compounds the problem, because no law can enforce a sense of community, and legalism can never substitute for courtesy. The decline of manners can only be reversed by finding and addressing the causes.

Causes

Following are several hypotheses, some of which are mutually exclusive, which try to explain the poor behavior prevalent in American audiences.

A study conducted at Temple University links declining audience conduct to a general increase in rudeness among Americans. This study concludes that social stresses such as unemployment have a ripple effect, eroding generosity and spawning a meanness of spirit which is eventually reflected in audience behaviors.[4] This theory is probably too simple and is easily challenged by observing that some cultures with higher unemployment (e.g., the United Kingdom) exhibit less of such rudeness. Possibly the theory of a contagious social tension has substance, but in a more subtle way. Public rudeness may be less related to deprivation than to frustration about social inequities. Solitary suffering destroys a sense of community while shared hardship often increases empathy and sensitivity. When most people shared a common suffering during the Great Depression or the austerity of World War II, plays and films were well attended and reportedly more appreciatively received.[5]

A related but almost opposite hypothesis suggests that audience rudeness increases when people have not suffered enough. Post-Vietnam audiences in

the United States are comprised of people who never faced or have largely forgotten the severe social stresses of the 1960's. American audiences which are products of the "me generation" and the self-congratulating society of the 1980's have nothing from which to escape, no sense of guilt or compassion to be aroused, no need for catharsis. "Yuppies" are so self-confident that they are more likely to judge than appreciate an artistic performance. One cynical, yet telling, analysis of audience decline blames the psuedo-sophistication of upwardly mobile college graduates who feel compelled to demonstrate what they learned in their elective film classes, and thus start criticizing a film as soon as it begins. The essayist Alan Lupo laments that he was thrown out of the movies as a child for cheering too loudly for Allied victories--and today finds "educated" film-goers talking aloud, commenting on things which aren't even there, and (most galling to him) "they get to stay."[6]

Other theories suggest that the decline of audience manners is more related to technological influences than to social changes. In Technostress: The Human Cost of the Computer Revolution, Craig Brod discusses the shortened attention span that is encouraged by videogames and computers.[7] This technology encourages quick reactions and offers instant resolutions--thus creating behaviors and expectations which are alien to aesthetic involvement. The very words "play" and "playhouse" have traditionally implied a sustained imaginary experience in which the auditors became players no less than the artists.[8] But when play is characterized by speed and reflexive behavior, the players become less capable of absorption, reflection, and evolution of response--all necessary ingredients of artistic appreciation.

Perhaps an even stronger influence of technology is the transformation of every living room into an auditorium--where performances are instantly available through television, video-cassette recorders, or stereo systems. Within these isolated auditoria, private listening and viewing behaviors are

developed--and then carried into public places on the infrequent occasions when a person goes out to a theatre or concert hall. People who eat and talk and walk around while "listening" in their living rooms simply act in the same way when attending a film or live performance. Ironically, this may also account for inappropriate and unmerited ovations at live performances. Viewers who see artistic performances on television often see a standing ovation at the conclusion, perhaps not realizing that these artists are usually the best in their fields and deserving of acclaim. When such television-conditioned auditors attend a public performance, they rise and applaud, imitating the audience behaviors they have been--even when the performance is mediocre or even though their own behavior has been inattentive.[9] This selective learning is furthered by the camera's constant focus on the performers, showing the home viewer little of what constitutes appropriate audience behavior throughout the performance. The preceding analysis echoes the concerns of Ralph Keyes, who describes privacy as a social force in competition with community. He believes that people have a natural desire for communal experience, but often settle for a semblance of community while still preserving privacy or displaying its influence.[10] Thus many spectators do not watch a performance in the presence of a focused assembly, but psychologically in the sole company of their immediate companions--to whom they speak freely without regard for the rest of the audience. Sometimes the glimpse of a larger community does surface, but privacy-conditioned audience members may then become more vocal and boisterous as an unconscious way of cheering on their own good feeling at this rare group experience; in this instance, privacy has been temporarily transcended, but a responsive and responsible community has not been achieved.

Solutions

Education remains the primary counterforce to disruptive social and technological influences. But educators cannot address audience behavior by teaching rules, for listener attentiveness remains "obedience to the unenforceable." Instead, educators must foster the old-fashioned concept of manners,

or at least the new-fashioned concept of raised consciousness. Toward that end, the following suggestions are offered.

1. Performance should be a central requirement of secondary and undergraduate communication education. In addition to the skill and artistry which can only be refined through disciplined performance, a realization of the audience's contribution is inescapable to a performer. Critiques by the instructor and fellow students are standard components of performance classes; but these critiques should be broadened to include evaluation of the listeners, holding them accountable as partners in the creative effort.

2. Curriculum planners should make performance courses prerequisite to criticism courses. Anyone who has produced a film, portrayed a character, or crafted a speech is likely to be more respectful as a film, drama, or rhetorical critic--and his/her empathy will be reflected in more appreciative listening.

3. Teachers should emphasize appropriateness rather than correctness of audience behavior. Class attendance at a rock concert and a symphony, and subsequent discussion of contrasting audience behaviors can help students develop a repertoire of responses. If actual attendance is impractical, discussion of differing situations can still be useful--e.g., possible responses to the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and a public speech and an opera. Such comparisons underscore that the best listeners respond not in the "right" way, but in an appropriate way.

4. Teachers should try to raise consciousness about audience behaviors. Some students have never considered that talking during a film or play is rude; it is habit to them, often reinforced and seldom challenged. Assignments might be crafted in which students observe and record distracting behaviors as they attend films and live performances. Readings might be assigned as case studies in audience behavior; e.g., May Sarton's Anger

(in which a concert singer is interrupted by a flash camera and expresses her anger to the audience)[11] and Willa Cather's "A Wagner Matinee" (in which a pioneer emigrant attends a symphony concert after 30 years on a primitive homestead, and weeps at the return of music to her life).[12] At a more philosophical level, Abraham Maslow's concept of synergy can be explored--his recognition that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.[13] Some students have experienced synergy in team athletics[14] and a few as performers; almost everyone has witnessed the mutual inspiration that suddenly causes a team or company or even a rock band to rise above the collective talents of the players. Once this phenomenon is identified, it becomes possible to envision a larger ensemble in which the auditors are also players--vital participants in the experience of synergy. A true understanding of this possibility can transform the conduct of an audience, for synergy is a "peak experience" which audience members will want to experience and repeat. One synergy is experienced, rules of behavior become irrelevant, because a natural law of mutual respect reasserts itself.

Conclusion

All communities, including the community of performance, require self-transcendence. The selfishness of current audience behaviors is less a rejection of community than inexperience in self-transcendence. In a time when social customs and technological changes are encouraging isolation, educators need to teach about communion--drawing attention to this insight of Edwin Wilson:

> When a collection of individuals responds. . . in unison to what is occurring on stage, their relationship to one another is reaffirmed. If there is a display of cruelty at which we shudder, or sorrow by which we are moved, or pomposity at which we laugh, it is reassuring to have others respond as we do. For a moment we are part of a group sharing a common

experience; and our sorrow or joy, which we might have feared was idiosyncratic, is found to be part of a broad human response.[15]

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